

Response: to top essays of the '85 grads of United Church of Christ Seminaries

Not Too Easy (Or Too Hard)

Willis Elliott #2015

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These personal but open *letters* to the neophyte clergy whose essays I've been asked to comment on are as near as I can come, in this medium, to my old eyes looking into their eyes and my aging voice speaking the truth in love—what seems to me to be the truth, and as much love as I can manage in this medium. Face to face, I could fashion more fitting words, seeing and hearing their responses.

Sin is anything extended far enough in a straight line. I repent preventively wherever, not having their presence to bend me back to their personal reality, I have unwittingly taken off in a straight line and left them in the dust.

How easy to abuse the text of their essays as a pretext for doing my thing! I can only pray and plead that where I have yielded to the temptation, the authors will not become so irritated as to fail to profit from my voice afar off. The God who can turn wrath to praise can turn wandering off into guidance home.

Throughout, in the letter mode, my mood is prayerful reflection on the mission and message of the Church—local and larger, UCC and ecumenical. The Church's Lord is coming to the Church and the world out of the future.

Pamela, God has given you a keen mind, a warm heart, and a fluent pen. Your paper distresses me because it's so hard to pick at; and I can't help you by doing no more than

praising you and thanking God for you, can I?

Looks like by the time you got to seminary, everything had happened to you except death. Ideal time of life to go to seminary.

You have turned on your life-journey the light of your commitments and the tools of your trade: how it warms an old seminary professor's heart to see such life-ministry integration!

Now I'm going to chance saying something dangerous, so easily misunderstood. If you hadn't said a word about that wonderful husband of yours, I'd have known anyway that for many years your whole being has been in communion and creative conflict with the whole being of a good man. God can't finish creating a woman without a man's help (whether or not her husband), and vice versa is even truer. Churches have big sad trouble with male and female clergy who are only half created and don't know it.

Your exposition of how you discovered the ambivalences and ambiguities of your own very human heart is delightful in its candidness. You'll doubtless help many to trust that if they go honest with themselves, maybe even in public, as you do, they won't go poof and disappear. And, since you are level-eyed about your own participation in evil as well as good, you'll not be a censorious preacher.

Aha, something to pick at! "God is not a general, but a private who

yearns for the war to be over." He (sic) is both. (After a long commitment to inclusive language, during which I desexized hymns for seminary commencement, I've backslidened except for some generic uses of "man," "—man," and "he/his/him.")

You'd've made a sour nun, so the Lord delivered us from that. And, with your bracing view of the church's potential for being good news to all humanity, you should make the kind of pastor I'd like to have for my own.

John A., please don't put me down as a curmudgeon! Rather, put me up on the mantel, and glance at me for a few days before you throw me into the fire. My letter to you must be mainly unpleasant reading. Sorry about that.

Was your paper written for a term theme in a philosophical-theology course? Why do I have to guess?

Two cheers for your metaphysical passion. When Cronkite closed with "And that's the way it is," it wasn't so (in my view) even in what's newsworthy, to say nothing of the universe. But you have the courage not to bug out on saying how it all looks to you out there and in here and everywhere in between: you care about the really real. Why, then, not three cheers? Because (1) you seem to overrate the importance of the ontological question (unless, as I say, this is a redacted phil.-th. paper), and (2) nowhere do you reveal consciousness

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that the "really real" is really elusive to reason. On the latter, quaffing fifteen minutes of metaphysical poetry daily for one month might help.

The sad and freeing (therefore glad) truth is that questions are in negative proportional concomitance to answerability. Translation: We can answer only the little ones. As a reversible proposition, the better you can answer a question, the less important it is. But some things that can't be done are worth doing as well as you can, and metaphysics is one of them. My old teacher Hartshorne did it well because he always smiled in self-distancing as he was propounding a profundity. Do you smile? I don't think so, but I hope I'm wrong. I'm afraid I detect in you a youthful anxiety about the reality question, and faith that you have a spread that covers the bed. This old man thinks you'll never manage more than a handkerchief which, being moved rapidly all over the bed, may create the illusion that it is a bedspread. But an illusionist is the opposite of what you rightly yearn to be. I commend your yearning and your responding, though I'm unable to manage any enthusiasm for your current answering. The heuristic-indicative is a proper mode for the philosopher, but the petitionary fits the religious leader: "O Lord, your sea is so great and my boat is so small." Faith is gratitude for the handkerchief and for serene joy in knowing that it need not cover the bed.

After that blast against your pat-smooth metaphysical equations and negations, I've a spasm of compunc-

tion. What you're really up to is grounding yourself not so much ontologically as societally. You are asking the occupational question Where can I fit in? and the critical question Can I fit in? I hope you never loose the tension between those questions. Clearly, you want to be, and help the churches be, on the evangelical boundary between the "already" and the "not yet." Your heart is more Christian than your mind, which is better than the other way round.

Another point of compunction: This is a JK (judge's kid) talking at a PK (preacher's kid). I might learn something if I were to submit a paper to you and let you talk at me. But it's still my turn, so . . .

You say you are "a white, middle-class American male." You are also, though you don't say so, young—which is a worse condition than any of the other four, but the only one of the five that is self-remedying. I thank God you have a grand vision and can articulate it with some clarity, and I can't complain that your young stomach has much undigested food in "life-force" (Luke Skywalker?)—which it—"evolution," "transformation," "liberation," seem to have more oomph for you than the biblical terms. I go with you in your hit-list of negative parameters: "individualism," "privatism," "perfectionism," "anthropocentrism."

But I'm worried that you may have set yourself up for an unnecessarily broken heart, by IFD (excessive idealism about "transformation" and

"liberation," leading to excessive frustration, leading to excessive disappointment-disgust-despair). In my own church on a recent Sunday morning, I said "Some members are doing the church more harm than good and ought to leave." They don't pay me. I'm afraid you might say something like that in a church you expect to continue paying you. The Kingdom (sic) of God may come if you just try to help folks get through the world doing as little damage as possible (including to the environment). Maybe a little more. Yes, at least a little more.

You wouldn't guess it, but I'm an old radical who's gotten fired more than once for saying things I'm afraid you may say, and I don't regret any of it, so my advice to you on this matter is probably worthless. But my worry about you is not worthless if you can receive it as a mode of prayer for you and your ministry.

Finally, I must warn you about women, feministic women. You have let them corrupt you into corrupting quotations by scattering "(sic)"s throughout to signal your awareness that the language is pre-inclusive. I have known almost everyone you quote and can see their facial expressions if they were to encounter this bit of nonsensical pollution. My reason for not minding your bowdlerizing of the New Testament by reference to the Greek is this: anything to get ministers to use their Greek Testament!

You say you and your wife committed entropy (sin) when she gave up

one man's name (her father's) to take another man's name (yours): she didn't sin in retaking the earlier man's name? If you have children, do you plan to name them alternately after the two aforementioned men? Historically, a woman taking her man's name liberated her from her father (including her father's name). Many factors now militate against husbands and fathers taking responsibility for wives and children: we have a men's liberation movement, men being liberated from their wives and children. The woman's having her man's name (1) reminds them both of their many responsibilities and (2) compensates for the fact that the male's relationship to offspring is less profound than the female's. A clergy couple ought to think hard on this because (1) they should model the family against America's rising bastardy and family abandonment, and (2) they will not be considered by many churches if they have different last names.

Finally, I warn you against sloganitis. After quoting a Jew (Amos), you say "To the degree that the community embodies justice and liberation, it is Christian." Your logic is "it is Jewish." If your religion is only the struggle for justice and peace, why call it Christian?

As you can see, you hooked me. I don't think a lot of your paper, but I think a lot of you. You've got courage, boldness, compassion. In a careless world, you care deeply. God bless.

Lois, for more than 40 years I've been living joyfully every day with someone in your category, viz., Midwestern farm girl. I'm in danger of being soft on you, not doing you any good. For body-soul solidarity, how can anything beat memorizing the Heidelberg Catechism while doing farm chores? And what a stewardship: most of the people you minister to will be weaker in body, soul, or both. You will often be on the edge of despair in your own striving to help shaky, fragile folks who are less and less sure they have any significant control over their lives and destinies. You'll need to make patent your "latent romanticism" and everything else God's gifted you with.

The underside of your early life, viz., the social narcissism and xenophobia of your community, is what you'll experience again and again in the congregations you serve—and you're ready for them! Don't be too ready. The old Sunday school song isn't all wrong: "Bring the little ones (of all ages) to Jesus." Most of the folks you try to nudge toward the Kingdom are not like you, "a willing exile" from the ark of safety; they are huddling as far inside away from the storm as they can get. You got tough young: "I pushed the boundaries to their maximum inclusion; I often felt excluded as a consequence." Don't bully the trembling, but of course don't coddle them either.

"The present does not always disclose the Presence": that is your dissatisfaction, and your ministry. The Presence is here, here-and-now: that is your satisfaction and joy. Cultivate this

satisfied dissatisfaction; don't let either factor overwhelm the other. "Blessed discontent" is how you like to put it. And "holy discontent." And even "radical discontent."

"I have always understood the Scriptures to be mine." What, no alienation from androcentrism, phallocentrism, patriarchy? You and your husband have long been battlers in compassionate causes and have a deep and steady commitment to the Presence and to the human potential for truly human community. Looks as though you decided to sit this one—feminism—out. Maybe you can do something to stop feminism from getting crazier and crazier: men, frightened, have been saying only Hit me again . . . frightened of witches who swoop down on them and shriek "Sexist language!" (Yesterday, a pastor told me he's taking earlier retirement than he'd planned: "I just can't take it anymore.")

My heart sings and hopes because you two together "see the absence of the Presence" and "cannot rest easy." God give you shalom in Jesus today and forever.

Judith, God gave you the courage to make the whole trip from giving up hope in the church (so you left) to giving up hope in alternatives (so you're back). It's good to be *back* instead of only *here*, isn't it. You never entirely lose the critical distancing you gain from running off the edge into the darkness into the arms of God. How the church now needs, ever has needed, that critical distanc-

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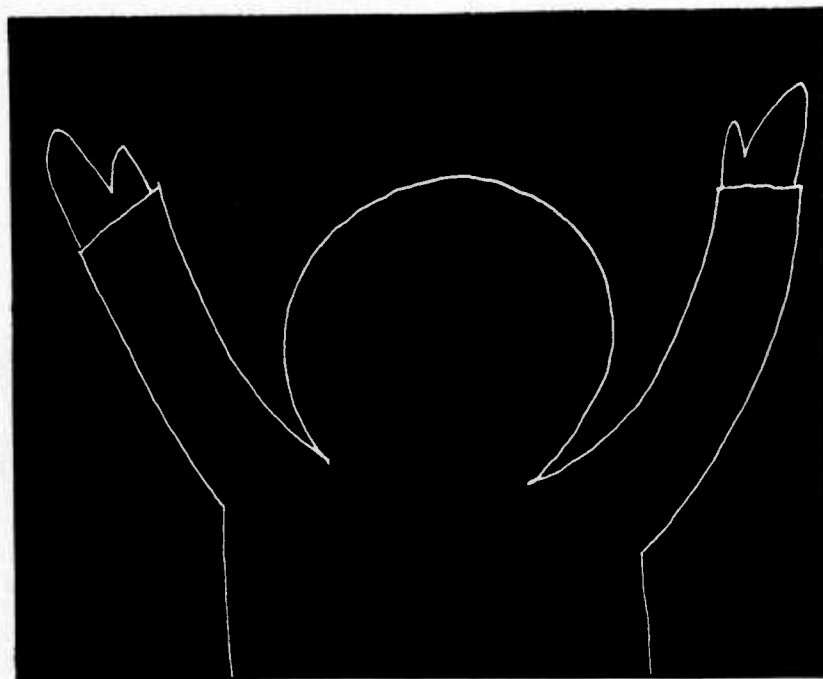
ing! A big hug and hope for the returnee. All the way from antimembership to pro-ordination, the maximum distance. (Are you a constitutional extremist, or is extremism unusual for you?)

Speaking of distancing, I must distance myself from being seduced by your diagrams: I am myself so visual as to be tempted to think "If it's a diagram, it's true."

Splendid crispness, that wresting of your outline from one clause in one verse of Ephesians. Good, too, to hear one more witness for the Bethel Bible Series, the toughest group-Bible-study process now going the rounds of the churches; and to hear that it was for you, as a teacher of it, the bridge back.

"First, I am dedicated to mutual ministry." Both your diagram and your exposition lead me to think that *mutuality*, which for you is a control value, speaks of your hope that the church can learn to transcend gender alienation and thus be both a symbol and an agency of human unity and even ultimate cosmic shalom (Ephesians "all things," which is Greek for "the universe"). Like Colossians, Ephesians expounds cosmic Christianity, a breathtaking and energizing vision. May the smallest harbingers of it, in your ministry and beyond, ever set your heart to singing so that you not be overwhelmed by sadness or (worse!) shrillness.

"Partnership" is another biggie in your love-lexicon. In feminist theology, the big pusher of this is Letty Russell, who was my partner in



teaching a one-year doctoral seminar on "Life/Ministry Integration." I feel her gracious, incisive presence whenever I hear the word. And I see that you, too, have been blessed by her. God's main medicine against the disease of prejudice is the presence, among "minorities," of indubitably superlative human beings. Most folk are only equal, but some folks are especially equal, *primus inter pares* ("first among equals").

Now the hard part. In my growing up, the church was for me two warm fuzzies: I was loved, and my maleness was affirmed. You got only one warm fuzzy, and you've a sense of mission to go after that other warm fuzzy—for everybody's, the church's, the world's, good. The church's tradition is ambiguous, but the church's mission now clearly includes gender blindness, a shift from gender to the gifts God has given each child, girl or boy. To treat children categorically according to the shape of their skinbags reminds me of the death-camp thumb that sent some to the work-

chambers and some to the gas-chambers.

But I hope you aren't a rabid gender-dimorphism hater. Research at Harvard Med and elsewhere is strengthening the suspicion that there's a hormonal base for the separation of in-the-cave and out-of-the-cave duties. Your strong-estrogen types, no matter the skinbag shape of the individual, are going to go for in-the-cave, nurturant, relational activities—pastoring, e.g. High-testosterone types, whether boys or girls, will from an early age sniff the breezes coming into the cave and wonder what's going on out there, or what might. Human virtues and vices associate themselves both regularly and oddly with persons and groups of both predispositions: in or out of the cave, humans raise hell and lower heaven.

According this view, which I find persuasive, here's what went wrong under the old patriarchy: (1) Role-assignments got rigidly correlated with skinbag shapes, so boys couldn't

be nurses and girls couldn't be priests (though the church is, among other things, an in-loco-parentis cave); (2) The ridiculous myth was perpetrated that what goes on outside the cave is more important than what goes on inside the cave; (3) By a false straight-line extension (sin being anything extended far enough in a straight line), society-history claimed that what goes on outside the cave is more important than what goes on inside, so . . . (4, we're getting deeper into sin) The boys should control what goes on on both sides of the cave-entrance.

Now I, having lived with this nonsense advantageously in a male skin-bag, didn't really notice the injustice till Betty Friedan shrieked about it in 1964, the year I read her *The Feminine Mystique* on an all-male commuter train between New York City and Chappaqua.

All right, I'm pleading for a little sympathy, at least the admission that I'm probably no worse than your average woman would be if we'd've been living in a matriarchy and a masculinist movement had hit us. Let's be fair: there hasn't been much fairness around lately. And relations between the sexes, which have been getting more worse than better, can't get more better than worse until there's more fairness. Here, I expect God will help us more through biology (hormonal and genetic research) than through anything else.

My guess? The girls will wind up controlling almost everything important by a new wisdom of letting the

boys—even helping the boys—control almost everything public. This is what I mean by “the new patriarchy.” As a pastor, you will yearn with God toward “the new being” of human beings: are you mythically and emotionally free to help girls become new women and boys become new men? My hunch is that you aren't but that you are in the way of becoming so. God hasten it! To honor our God and the earth, we must learn anew how to honor hormones and genes in their infinitely various dihelixing in human skin-bags. Why do so many feminists just get mad when I say that? I hope you aren't one of them. The church, which usually drags its feet on “sex” matters, has a chance to lead this time. I hope we don't muff it.

As for our religion, the most masculine of religions (Father-Son worship, et al), it's open to and eager for “the new patriarchy.” But it's death against the Inclusive Language Lectionary and all other attempts to prettify the Bible in the name of a divine androgyny. Go easy on that language-tinkering in your ministry or you'll defeat your project to “unite all things. . . .”

I'm big for your Diagram C. So far, Sun Moon—ugh!—is the only Christian (?) theologian to take yin/yang homeostasis seriously. At his seminary, I gave a faculty-students lecture titled “Sun Moon Is Not a Christian”—but his gender construction is genius-level, imposing, and important for us all.

Hang in there, sister, and bless me

and everybody else real good.

Kurt, many failed laity (their high school counselors having misguided them) make good clergy. Another truth: Successful laity, of whom you are one, make especially good clergy, God rewarding them for walking away from the world's rewards and blandishments.

Of course it's possible that you've been second-career misled. You need to keep checking that out, so you won't stick with “the church” if you shouldn't nor feel guilty if you return to “the world” if you should. A lonely business, deciding what God, who doesn't speak English (or any other language you speak) wants. Keep it lonely. (Actually, God speaks all languages but is afraid of pulling rank on us.)

It may not be practical to require that all pastors have “made it” in “the world.” But I'm appalled at the ignorance and arrogance of masses of clergy who, eating off the church, have never had to eat off the world, of which they take an unjustifiably dim view. Such innocent (bad sense) clergy control national church offices and issue sophomoric pronouncements (with their running-dog laity) on worldly matters of which they've had no direct dirt-under-the-fingernails experience. Welcome aboard, and may you be bad news to these innocents! I.e., good news in disguise.

So going to seminary didn't presto turn you into an angel or even—more modest expectation—a saint. Except

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for the psycho-jargon, I like what you have to say about our Lord in the wilderness; it rings real; you must have been there with him.

How good and hopeful that you know you'll always be doing business with "Mommy and Daddy" and the Sky Father and Earth Mother! Yes, I've stretched your statement, but have I falsified it? I think not. You've done business in deep waters, and you've more distance from your imperial ego than have most clergy at the beginning of their professional ministries.

"Perhaps God will be seen as clearly in the abyss as in the light." Reminds me of Gerald Heard, science executive for the BBC during World War II and latter-day mystic, whom I asked to give his spiritual journey on a retreat I was managing. His last words: "I have been to hell, and God is there, too." Many a young pastor is eager to move his sheep from earth to heaven: you know that a more modest project is more appropriate, viz., to move them from hell to earth, the good earth.

Barbara, what a tough, sinewy, gritty, compassionate, intelligent religion you have! Earth mother and church mother. I don't know your body-size, but your soul-size is so big you can easily, without meaning to, frighten smaller creatures (such as the proverbial "average church member"). I don't think you're too much—but I know a lot of people would, and will. Watch it! Feed it to them bite-size, not bomb-size.

I doubt if you know what I'm saying,

so file this in "1990" and then have a reread after frightening folks for five years.

A tale of two Fritzes who were teachers of mine: (1) Perls put you on the "Hot Seat" and hammered away at your inauthenticity, and he was great; (2) Kunkel watched for you to turtle, to pull in your soft parts; then he'd let up till your soft parts came out again; and he was greater.

But I don't really worry about your being overbearing. You have too keen a sense, for that, of God's participation in human agony and hope.

I rejoice that your theology is both orthodox and truly you. In wandering through the whirlwind of the world—the death of a son and of a marriage, the chaos of bringing up your three daughters, your new marriage and becoming grandma, your work in slums at home and abroad—you haven't let your brain and heart atrophy. And you come up easily with gems like "Liberation is freedom from 'blaming God' or 'leaving it up to God.'"

It all sets me to meditating about the requirements for seminary matriculation. We need (1) enough warm bodies to keep the seminary open (an institutional requirement, albeit dubious), and (2) students mature enough to understand why God has a white beard (no sexism intended). From the institutional standpoint, it's potential good news to the seminaries that the population is aging. And if the archetype of the Old Wise One (female and male) gains strength, as I believe it will after the nuttiness of our "youth culture" subsides, there will be more

clergy spots for Grandma and Grandpa—who have the additional good that, being soon dead, they will not too long occupy remunerative clergy spots, thus abating the problem of excess clergy.

You have a goodly heritage, and will leave a goodly inheritance. "Our acts affect God." I have less and less doubt of it; and more and more faith that all good is taken up into God, beyond our ken and even our dreams.

I stand in awe of you, and guess you'd laugh at me if I said it to your face.

Finally, you've been blessed from all across the ecumenical spectrum—as though, e.g., "Carl" is his first name, "Swedish-Covenant" is his middle name, and "Christian" is his last name. You are living, almost without noticing it, what it means to be (to use a self-descriptive phrase in the UCC) "a united and uniting church." For your deep and daily devotion to the one Lord makes one church, church oneness, logical, natural, and real.

"There is no love that does not imply action for life." Yes! I must add a stricture: Jesus was both prophet and wiseman, and you go light on the second. Please: The world is to be enjoyed as well as cried over and pounded on for justice and peace. Please be more (your words) "after the model of Jesus of Nazareth."

John K., the old saw that one "shouldn't go into the ministry if one can help it"—unbalanced though it be—comes to mind in your case.

Social work, law, then submission to God's call to become clergy. But your self-description in your pre-clergy days as "an accommodated disciple" with your Christian faith only "augmenting the external dimensions of my life" worries me. I know you're trying to say something authentic, but it comes across to me as about as real as the old Roman Catholic argument that marriage is good and clerical celibacy is better.

But the matter wrinkles my brow, for I hold a higher view of ordination than most of my Congregational "brethren" (as that's the side of UCC I come from). God in the Spirit in the people sets the clergy above the people, then comes the divine and human testing as to whether a particular clergyman (generic sense) is worthy: in action, clergy must earn the right to be above their people by being alongside them. Unfortunately, the UCC is so infested and debilitated by the myth of "equality" that many of our members resent ordination itself, suspicious that ordination is structural inequality and therefore unjust and inherently oppressive. They're after your hide before your first Sunday! Outwit them, man, for Jesus' sake. Love the hell out of them. Earn your right to be prophetic by being pastoral.

Something subtle you have going for you here: Human beings never outgrow their need for a shaman. Study this fact as you watch television. And remember Hitler. And Jesus. And Moses. And pray that God will help you minister to that most primitive level of your people's being. Underneath being a prophet, be a pastor;

and underneath a pastor, a priest. Denominations that are not stupid about this—e.g., the Southern Baptists—are "bringing them in from the fields of sin." In religion, folks move toward what they sense their souls need. "Church growth" is not a dirty, 12-letter phrase.

So what's this "ministering on behalf of a congregation, as opposed to empowering a congregation to minister on behalf of Jesus Christ"? I'm all for lay ministry and was Dean of Lay Theological Education in a seminary. But why "opposed," why not both—indeed, why not the second through the first?

The lay-ministry movement is part authentic, and part (as laicistic revolt against clericalism) questionable. Toqueville nailed, in the American ethos, the incompatibility of freedom and equality, which he sensed to be a danger in his own country (the soon-to-come French Revolution slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"). Freedom unqualified by equality anarchy and the oppression of the weak by the strong; equality unqualified by freedom becomes tyranny and the suppression of God's gifts to individuals. (Roughly, here's the tension between, respectively, "capitalism" and "communism.") Face it: Your Evangelical & Reformed heritage struck a good balance here, but the Congregational-Christian heritage was—and the UCC is—lopsided internally for "freedom" as the equality of laity and clergy and externally for "equality" in all societal dimensions (sexual, economic, political, social, cultural). You will be walking a minefield of buzzwords, slogans,

ideological myths, and taboos—as thick as, though different from, those in fundamentalist churches.

The trick is, how now can you be a man as well as a pastor? If a female pastor is assertive, she's progressive; if a male, he's regressive, a tyrant in general and a sexist in particular. (Yes, things are tough all over; it's tough being a pastor these days, no matter your skinbag's shape and your "sexual orientation.") My advice to you is to be the person God is shaping you up to be, and damn the torpedoes. It won't be me that gets fired; as for you, there's always social work and law to fall back on.

And, if you are an ordained minister in addition to being a man, instead of instead of, there's a good chance that the churches you serve will become agents of liberation and cease being (your words) "a caricature, a parody of the Gospel."

Earl, that "small church in western New York" is getting a pastor who means business, who knows whose he is, and who has a sober and clear-eyed understanding of our several traditions in the UCC. I hope you have also, through faith and humor, enough self-distancing so you won't shock those folks unproductively—for shock them you will, since you're determined to lay the unvarnished Christian religion on them.

Do you suppose I know them? A half century ago I preached in many of those little churches in that area, in the evening services moving the two oil-lamps (which were on arms on each side of the pulpit) so as best to



see the Bible and my notes. Are they the same people? If they are, be prepared to be shocked as well as shocking! The human heart changes slowly even when the outer world is in pell-mell change, and churches are full of folks who imagine they can be friends of God by being enemies of change (and who, in this, aren't entirely wrong, though you'll be tempted to think they are). If you fight with them for what of the past should not have been lost, just maybe some of them will fight with you for that of the future which ought not to be delayed. (All right all right: I'm preaching to you to practice what I didn't when I was a young pastor. Why shouldn't you do better than I did? For one thing, the behavioral sciences these past 50 years have made 500 years of progress.)

The UCC is the only church (denomination, communion) whose two historic strands represent, each, one of

the twin values of freedom and authority—as you put it, “the central polity issue of autonomy/order.” You don't mention the ethnic factor: The English (Congregational-Christian) muddling through, the German (Evangelical & Reformed) marching through. Soon after the merger forming the UCC, I, a C-C, came onto the national staff and was put in an old E & R national office, where the German language was so natural that visitors from Germany could assume they'd be able to use German (which was a fact).

What happened? Instead of an English/German, autonomy/order balance, the UCC tilted sharply toward local-church autonomy. I was and am disappointed, for we've passed up our opportunity to create a fresh polity without ideological imbalance. Please do something about this.

Why you? Because both theologically and ecclesiologically—probably also

dispositionally—you came down on what is now the light side of the balance. When you say “covenant,” you are talking more about God than about (sic) man, and more about responsibility than about fellowship, and more about “vertical inequality” than about “horizontal equality,” and more about divine demands for—ugh!—obedience than about human requests for cooperation, and more about Christians as “slaves” of Jesus than as partners with God and one another. You probably are even still calling the Ten Suggestions, the Ten Commandments.

Count on short pastorates, especially the first one. I hope I'm wrong. Our beloved UCC has sold out to trendiness and the religion of nondiscrimination (including indiscriminateness). Like the poor ol' Democratic Party, we've become a plaything of special interests. Stand up, stand up for Jesus, and may your fight be long.

Janet, I rejoice in the lean clarity of your exposition of what God has done and is doing and, vis-a-vis this divine action, who Jesus Christ is and what his Church is to be about (both senses of “about”: meaning and action). May you, throughout your ministry, manage to maintain faithful simplicity in living and proclaiming—in “preaching, teaching, healing”—both the timeless and the timely Presence.

I'm reminded of a pre-Watergate conversation I had with Abraham Heschel. He almost spilled his drink when I mentioned Nixon, and exploded “That man has everything

but integrity!" Sometimes, beholding the churches' preoccupations, their more reacting to the media than acting in ministry, I'm tempted to say "The churches have everything but God!" Please weaken my temptation to fall into that blue funk. Be like the "Hill St. Blues" sarge who sends out the cops with "Let's get out there and do it to them before they do it to us."

For what gets our attention gets us, and what holds our attention is our god. Be the lady of your attending instead of "relevantly" ministering through whatever Reagan writes on his "Theme of the Week" bulletin board. For one thing, everybody you minister to and with will soon be dead and wonders what that's all about, and most of them suspect you don't know. But you do!

"The Church is to be the faithful community that continues the ministry and mission of Jesus," like Jesus "'mighty in deed and word.'" Very true, very well said. "We are set free from the bondage of sin . . . to serve others. We are concerned with . . . victims of injustice, oppression, and despair because we know that God wills for them to be liberated." Why do you not include liberation from their sin so they, like you, will be free to serve others? In this non sequitur, you slip out of your Christian orthodoxy into a shrunken, this-worldly, trendy notion of "liberation." You have too much Christian commitment and theological savvy to let yourself get away with this secular distortion of the full gospel message of sin and grace. I know, you just unrolled your M.Div. diploma yes-

terday, so why am I being tough on you here?

Because you have everything it will take to move yourself and others to the next spiritual-intellectual stage of understanding and living the wholeness of "salvation," which includes more than "liberation" (though liberationists in "the movements" seem unaware of it). Break out of this sad and silly syllogism so many now need liberation from: (1) "Salvation" means "liberation"; (2) "Liberation" means deliverance from "the oppressors," who are _____ (the predicate depends on whether one is doing class analysis or gender analysis or . . .); (3) Therefore, let's get tooled-and-weaponed up against the oppressors, and so we shall be saved and saviors.

Finally, you use the good Germanism that God in Jesus has "broken into" this world. How about also broken out (the resurrection)? And how about breaking in again (New Testament eschatology)?

But take heart: my heart is with your heart, and your hope.

Christine, so you've got a thing about water. If you were of the generation before you, I'd ask whether you are an Aquarius—but you probably don't know, and don't need to. You write beautifully, mystically about your water-experiences; and I might think you a water-fetishist were it not for my having grown up, as you did, on the Mighty Torrent (my papa being judge of the Niagara Water-front from Buffalo to Niagara Falls).

So, for you, water is more than a metaphor for ministry, though it is that. As you know, it's a religious symbol for cleansing, the quenching of spiritual thirst, and the feminine. (I hope I'm not seducing myself away from your concern. I think I'm not.) Your exposition of Jeremiah as whirlpool reveals your gift of metaphoric power in meditation ("the inward journey") and in ministry. Develop that gift, which explains much of the power of black preaching and, by neglect of it, much of the weakness of white preaching.

Warning: Don't let your metaphors pollute Scripture. I like your reaching from Niagara Falls power to Jesus and the woman at the well, but why have you nothing to say about the Fourth Gospel's point in the story ("eternal life")?

But I can't resist running my own number on your Niagara extended metaphor. In all Chinese thinking, the masculine is hard ("upper Dolomite") and the feminine is soft ("lower shale"): "Erosion occurs when the surging . . . waters churn away the softer lower layer at a faster rate than they do the upper, hard Dolomite." Please preach unto me a helpful feminist sermon on that one. A clue: Somehow the girls are letting the boys down as, from time immemorial, the boys have let the girls down. I have no doubt that you are a worthy minister of Jesus Christ. Help us boys, and I have no doubt that in that action you will be helping the girls also. And vice versa.

You want to remove the hardness,

but you admit it would "drain Lake Erie." I love Lake Erie. Please help save it. Honor and serve "the Artist God who combines water and sunlight to paint rainbows," and also makes dolomite and shale.

Frederick, you've got it if you can put it in one sentence, as in your sense-making journey you came to manage: "Anything that detracts from my ability to love is a distraction from what is important in my life." You will agree that in changing from past to present tense, I have enhanced your affirmation: for you it's a timeless control-value, "the primary message of God revealed in the Bible and the Christian tradition."

I can't bring myself to say that no one should be ordained who hasn't had a conversion experience, for in many cases ordination leads to conversion. But I do know that there's comfort and strength if, prior to church commitment and ordination, one has a definite, high-energy conversion, albeit as quiet as yours. Again, you don't have to have made it in the world, as you did, before conversion—but, again, it helps. It puts hair and skin on what otherwise is apt to be a jejune and ethereal experience.

I am intrigued by your fresh theological closed openness—i.e., "no one comes to the Father but by me" + "All the major religions . . . have one thing in common, the charge to lose oneself to find oneself." You've hammered out for yourself and your ministry a platform and program for a committed, compassionate, intelligent evangelism. Go to it, man!

Finally, into a paper so full of crisp language and life-ministry integration, you did let slip a bit of nonsense: "I was certain, based on my personal experience as well as . . . the scriptures, that there was no 'Great Scorekeeper in the Sky.'" Neither of those bases can support that certainty. Christianity teaches that we get ours, rewards and punishments, both inwardly and outwardly and on both sides of death: the universe is morally serious through and through. If the "concept of a judging God no longer conformed with my understanding of my relationship with God," you've got a severe problem with biblical religion. But I'm not laying it all on you: liberal religion let Jung lead it to seeing the shadow side of humanity after denying the dark, judging side of God. The high priest of this one-lung religion is B.F. Skinner (positive reinforcement), and his older acolyte is Norman Peale (positive thinking). I hope, I think, you'll grow into doing better than that.

Polly, you have taken all your sources seriously, even the founding documents of the UCC, and have a fine sense of tandem truths, of the need in life and ministry for balance, that nothing of God's truth, natural or revealed, be lost or distorted.

You've got a good fix on the UCC ethos, its strength and weakness, and you do well to preach vulnerability; but in this paper you yourself are not vulnerable. Indeed, you are barely visible. Please forgive if I have over-expected your paper to be you on paper; but if you are vulnerable, your paper in its silence misrepresents you.

Both your dimensions feel overintellectual. Your vertical does not show devotion and devotional praxis, and your horizontal has no feel of hair and skin. I hope I'm wrong; but in case I'm not, here's a diagram for you to pray on: Draw a vertical line with "heavenly" at the top and "earthy" at the bottom; then cross it—make a cross—with a horizontal line having "habit" on one end and "adventure" on the other. For long years I've used this as a counselor to clergy. I hope it helps you add two more balances. You and I both want Christ in the center, so write him in the center of your diagram.

Finally, though you don't use the word "courage," that's what I think your paper is about. And your life. May you be in your life as courageous and balanced as your mind is in this worthy paper.

A Note On What's Missing

What you put in directs you, but what you leave out may wreck you. These new ex-seminarians have "the right stuff" and help me to be hopeful for the UCC and the wider church, the whole Church, in what they say. But—as the last section of a PhD thesis should be "Prospects for Future Research"—I must try to bless them with a few thoughts about what they've left out.

(1) Except for a clause here and there, they've left out the *biosphere*, the thin layer of life-support on our tiny planet. I pray that the Church will lead a paradigm shift from the human sphere (anthropocentrism) to the biosphere. It will mean the most

radical soul-mind revolution since the Enlightenment.

(2) Even more so, they've left out the *afterlife*, almost as though to mention it would be counterrevolutionary activity against the thisworldly concerns—the telereal, the psycho-real, the socioreal—that dominate their attention. Once, one essayist mentions Matthew 25, which explodes the myth that thisworldliness and otherworldliness are alternatives: it is the Bible's most dramatic passage on "social action" *and* on the afterlife judgment! The eschatological sanction as incentive to compassionate action. The works: promises/-threats, rewards/punishments. All our UCC foreparents used Matthew 25 with full force instead of half force, each world as incentive to the other. And "the growing churches of America" still do.

What happened was that what we called in the 1930s "the acids of modernity" eroded away first hell and then heaven, and the canonical statement became "You get your heaven and your hell right here." I shall point to only one effect, an effect noticeable in most of our essays in this article: pie in the sky when you die by and by became bread on the table here and now. This world became heated up with the energies and hopes of both worlds, and "causes" and "movements" became the essence of piety. For Herman Kahn (Hudson Institute) 18 years ago I traced this budding development in the consciousness of young Latin American priests. Herman, a genius for sniffing out the future, said

"Check it out; if those priests are shifting attention from afterlife to this life, the clergy will drift downward from the rich to the poor, and it'll be a new ballgame." My study confirmed his suspicion, and we call the new ballgame "liberation theology," which yields so easily to intellectual-critical constructs (such as Marxism) that are wholly thisworldly. There is yet no full-bodied, two-worldly critical sociotheology. The now old oneworldly theologies, both "liberal" and "liberationist," are and must remain weak: the former slips off into humanism, the latter into Marxism. No wonder the UCC is weak and shriveling: it is a dupe of both. But not to be discouraged, neophytes! The UCC is also open, and far more malleable than most denominations. If we let the Spirit lead our minds into self-critical consciousness, we may free ourselves from the fictive myths that now rule over us.

(3) Our essayists leave out, make no use of, half of the New Testament's *sanctions* (incentives, motivators to piety and both private and public morality). One of them, the eschatological sanction, I separated out, because of its polymorphous importance, to become #2 in this list of left-outs. Just to list a few more of the left-out sanctions: the sapiential (wisdom/folly), the spiritistic (purity/obscenity—holiness; worship/blasphemy; charismatic experience). As one would expect, much-used sanctions in these essays are the social sanctions and the autonomous sanction (reflexive consequences, humans being their own worst ene-

mies and best friends).

To this old clergyman who's read the Bible daily in the original languages for a half century, the most glaring sanctional weakness of these essays is their failure to use Scripture with full force and range. That will come to those who daily expose themselves, heart and mind, to the Bible; that they may be free in the Bible, knowing it . . . free with the Bible, using it in life and ministry . . . and free from the Bible, transcending it, on the model of Jesus in the Spirit, with the "more light" that leads toward a more human church and a more humane world.

(4) Finally, our essayists say little or nothing about growing in love for God through devotional discipline, intellectual exploration (e.g., traditional and emergent models of sense-making and of discovery), personal witnessing and public evangelism (verbal missions), metaphysical and moral modesty (the mystery of good and evil, the difficulty of distinguishing between the sinful and the tragic), what used to be called "polemical theology" (attacking for the Faith, instead of only defending the Faith, i.e., "apologetical theology"), freedom through obedience, personal virtues/-vices, joy and its roots (love, gratitude, work, play, humor).

Did I expect them to do everything? No, but in their small space each did what seemed most important in self-presentation toward ordination. Having that in mind, I have tried not to go easy on them, or be too hard.

